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**Latina Teachers' Conversations on  
Cultural Identity, Language Ideologies  
and Humanizing Pedagogy**

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**Latina Teachers' Conversations on  
Cultural Identity, Language Ideologies  
and Humanizing Pedagogy**

**by**

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**Report**

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## **Dedication**

I primarily dedicate this work to my students, the ones I've had and the ones I will have. They are the reason why I want to become a better a teacher and why I continue to learn. I would also like to dedicate it to my always supporting husband, for never giving up on me.

## **Abstract**

### **Latina Teachers' Conversations on Cultural Identity, Language Ideologies and Humanizing Pedagogy**

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This paper presents a pedagogical inquiry on the impending need for teachers of underserved students to be conscious of their own cultural identity and language ideologies. The paper also inquires on the possible effect such realization has on teachers' practices, specifically on their usage of humanizing pedagogy in their classrooms. From a Freirean standpoint three bilingual, Latina teachers were invited to enter into a dialogue in order to identify each other's cultural identity, language ideologies and to make evident how this may have an impact or how it influences their teaching practices. Using data from interviews and other informal interactions the article examines and argues the need for teachers to enter in this type of reflective and conscientious dialogue in order to learn from each other ways to include and increase humanizing practices in their classrooms. Several themes that surface in this inquiry are 1) the importance of teachers becoming aware of their own cultural identity and language ideologies, 2) the need for formal opportunities in which teachers explore these matters in order to build a

community that causes change in the educational system, and 3) the presence, if any, of humanizing practices in these teachers' classrooms and how they can influence each other to improve the opportunities they provide for their students to succeed.

## **Table of Contents**

INTRODUCTION .....	1
MOTIVATION TO CONDUCT THIS INQUIRY .....	5
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK .....	8
LITERATURE REVIEW .....	12
METHODOLOGY .....	20
IMPLICATIONS .....	35
CONCLUSION .....	37
Appendix .....	39
References .....	41

## INTRODUCTION

*“It’s like when you told us that is very important to bring culturally relevant stuff, they [the students] feel connected. I really thought about it I wasn’t doing it, but I looked into it and I took it as something important...” —Camila*

*“[You ask] If I wish I had the ability to speak Spanish? I do... that is part of my heritage. We still have our traditions, but I do miss not having the Spanish.” —Misty*

*“[In my master studies] I saw that it is more than just teaching them about their own culture but to teach them about empathy, they need to understand other cultures and other people, it [education] should be inclusive...” —Esmeralda*

The low achievement of Latino students in this country has been ascribed to the absence of culturally, cognitively and linguistically relevant instruction (Trueba, 1999). Great focus is given to “best practices and methods” without paying attention to the people involved in the learning process. (Gutierrez & Rockoff, 2003). These “one size fits all” methods have been proven ineffective to provide Latino students with the tools and skills to succeed (Reyes, 1992). Furthermore, the public school system tends to blame the students and their differences from their peers instead of evaluating and reconsidering the teaching methods used. This mentality provides teachers with an excuse to assume a self-defeating attitude in which no one moves forward toward improvement. Teachers confuse their students’ cultural and linguistic differences with cognitive deficiency, and therefore, lower their academic standards (Moll, 1988; Valenzuela, 1999)



or present teaching approaches that may be effective for some students, but does not seem to work for all students (Bartolomé, 2010; Delpit, 1988; Reyes 1992). Along with these dehumanizing practices the system has been extremely successful in proliferating the superiority of mainstream ideas and concepts, stripping minoritized students of chances to break the pattern and claim their righteous place in the education system of this country.

As a teacher, I see myself as a long-life learner. I will engage in a pedagogical inquiry with three teachers in order to examine their culture and languages ideologies by engaging in a purposeful dialogue. I would like to see how such ideologies, affect and determine the direction of their pedagogical practices and how, if in anyway, they put into practice humanizing practices that result in the empowerment of themselves and their students.

Though there is an abundance of literature on best practices and programs to implement in the teaching of minority students, I would also like to explore how teachers strive to provide the right environment and experiences for their students. Vygostky (1978) introduces the concept of social learning affirming that learning occurs through social activities and from interacting with others. Since it is evident that teachers face difficulties and challenges in the education of minority students, they should turn to all their resources. They should take advantage not only of the curriculum and materials provided or acquired by them, but even more, to the human resources, the other teachers or staff that surrounds them in order to look for solutions. In this pedagogical inquiry,

drawing on a Freirean perspective, I would like to open a little window to see the possible benefits of teachers entering into a dialogue with other teachers (Freire 1973, Delpit, 1988; Clark et al., 1996) that would lead them to get to know each other's cultural identities, ideologies and beliefs. Since, it is evident that most educational approaches available to immigrant children or to students who speak languages other than English, are relatively subtractive (Valenzuela, 1999; Salazar, 2008), I would like to envision on the impact of dedicating time to explore and deeply inquire on these group of teachers' points of views and practices, and how such ideologies influence their relationship with their students, their students' families and the overall instruction they put into practice. I would also like to see their teaching approach and the possible personal empowerment opportunities they provide for their students.

In the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1973), Freire presents the concept of conscientização in which both the oppressor and the oppressed engage in a dialogue in search of a social consciousness. Those who enter into this dialogue may be able to realize the world, and together formulate new concepts, rules and paradigms. This process of conscientização is also known as a humanizing pedagogy (Batolomé, 1994). Bartolomé stresses the need for teachers to get involved in a process in which they will gain political consciousness, moving away from just blindly adopting methods, and better respecting their students' perspectives, history and background in order to lead students to become more actively involved in their learning (1994, p. 173). We know this makes a positive impact in the education of minority students, but I would argue that these

opportunities are just as important for teachers themselves. In order, to have a change in our school system, there needs to be a change in teachers' language and culture ideologies and beliefs. Another aspect of engaging teachers in this type of dialogue is the creation of a space in which teachers can share, not only their experiences, but also their knowledge and application of humanizing pedagogies. Humanizing pedagogies comprise the culturally aware and liberating approaches that some teachers provide for all students and that result in empowering those that have been traditionally oppressed.

In order to make real impact and open the way for all students to succeed, there's an impending need to formally provide a space and time for teachers to share and consider how to apply humanizing pedagogy in their classrooms. Regardless of level of experience, there's the need for collaboration and leadership. There is the need to tap into the strengths and talents of individual teachers in order to achieve collective progress (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009).

## MOTIVATION TO CONDUCT THIS INQUIRY

I became interested on this concept of teachers' cultural identity and the effect this self-awareness has in their classrooms during my master studies in bilingual/ bi-literate education. Just like many others, I migrated to this country at a young age (Chapa & Valencia, 1993) but I had already finished my Bachelor's degree in Puerto Rico. Though I'm not a product of this country's education, I was not immune to the effect of mainstream ideologies that leaves people doubting their worth and resources. Like Esmeralda Santiago (1994) whose book narrates her experience of transitioning from her life and experiences in Puerto Rico to the changes and process she underwent when moving to the United States, I also had my experience of *when I was Puerto Rican*. In order to become successful in this country I became assimilated. I may have become successful, but definitely not happy. The person I had always been had stopped existing and a more Americanized person was living my life; I dare to say, a life that had little to do with the real me.

I went through this process without knowing what was happening, but in a steady gradual way I started to devalue my own funds of knowledge and the resources that I had cleverly used in the past, but that were not being valued one I came to this country. After I became a teacher, I also started to limit my students' participation in their learning. Though I respected them and would always listen to their points of view I did not validate nor took advantage of their familiar and linguistic capital (Yosso, 2005, Palmer &

Martinez, 2013). I would be respectful to their parents, but would not include them in their children's education.

What caused the turning point in my life was learning about the history of Latino students in this country, seeing their hardships and becoming aware of their struggles in feeling the need to assimilate. Through this learning and the many conversations with the members of my cohort we started to reclaim our cultural identities, to learn the name of humanizing practices we were already applying in our classrooms and to adopt new ideas that would enrich the learning experience of our students, including their families and their communities. I entered into a Freirean dialogue with my classmates that transferred to my classroom and to my students' homes. Now I strive to establish positive relationships with my students and with their parents. My goal now, is not only to empower the little ones, but also their households, providing a space where we can all learn from each other and reclaim our humanity. It hasn't been easy to provide this kind of "safe space"; sometimes parents are surprised when I tell them that I would like to visit them in their homes or when I place myself as the learner and allow them to be more active, because they are not used to this type of opportunity, not because they are not interested.

Once I witnessed this "rebirth" among the members of my cohort, among my students' parents, and in myself, I started to envision this happening in my school, with my colleagues. I would like to describe how I conducted this pedagogical inquiry among some of my colleagues. I will concentrate on taking a closer look at the cultural identity

of three teachers of color, not to dwell in their levels of “conscientização” (Freire, 1970), but rather to find out the ways in which each of these educators may be applying humanizing pedagogy practices in their classrooms. I also wanted to see how much these educators could influence each other to develop further critical thinking and consciousness in order to make a difference for themselves and for their students

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The basis for this study is Freire's concept of humanizing pedagogy (1970). In his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire makes a call for humanizing pedagogy.

Humanizing pedagogy involves teachers having a change of mind and ceasing to use education to oppress or control students, but rather to enter into a process in which both teachers and students are learners and together make meaning of the world and of them. Freire refers to this process as praxis, in which they not only participate, but from which their active reflection leads them to humanize themselves and others (p. 36). Arce (2004) asserts the need for a counter *hegemonic* education, making a clear mention of the origin of the concept of hegemony, by the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1971).

Hegemony is the presence of control and manipulation by the dominant class over the entire society, using non-coercive methods to impose their values, ethics and ideas in democratic societies. This imposition is made possible and perpetuated when politicians, teachers or media, just to mention some, promote and reproduce the values and beliefs of the dominant class as the norm (Darder, in press)

Flores & Benmayor (1997) and Rosaldo (1994) present the concept of Cultural Citizenship, highlighting the problem faced by Latinos in the US: a need to reject and devalue their language and culture in order to endure the subtle but definite pressure posed by this society. When this pressure is imposed on young learners the results can be devastating, setting them up for academic failure (Valenzuela 1999). Since students

receive this mainstream hegemonic message from many angles of their lives, it becomes imperative to pay attention to the practices of the teachers they work with everyday.

Teachers whose own cultural identity is not well established may follow these hegemonic practices and beliefs, giving a more important place and emphasis to learning English (Reyes, 1992) and fostering assimilation to the mainstream culture by subtracting the students' heritage culture and language (Valenzuela, 1999).

This study will focus on the possible benefits and effect teachers, specifically Latina teachers, who are aware of their own culture, can have in the education provided to minority students. I will take a closer look to the need to help develop more teachers that would make a difference in their classroom fostering an atmosphere of respect and of mutual realization for their students and for other education professionals both in the classroom and beyond the school boundaries (Weisman, 2001; Freire, 1970).

Specifically, I will also investigate their positive language ideologies toward their students' heritage language and culture. Parting from the notion that,

“... Teachers who have retained their primary cultural identities expressed an awareness of the importance of Spanish in the lives of their students beyond the confines of the classroom. They recognized the need to convey a value for the native language as a means of affirming the cultural identity of their students.”

(Weisman, 2001, p. 221)

I would also like to explore the possible benefits of endeavoring to be agents of change in education. I suggest that by engaging novice (Milner, 2003) or experienced



teachers in a process of self-reflection of their practices, their cultural identity and their ideologies we can make a difference for our students. Therefore, the process of humanizing pedagogy may have a singular beginning, starting with the teacher as an individual, but it should ignite a desire for a dialogue that involves not only teacher and students, but also colleagues in order to humanize a larger group of people (Huerta & Brittain, 2010; Price & Osborne, 2000; Roberts, 2000). Additionally, I would like to highlight the need for the establishment of learning community relationships (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009), in which it becomes safe to talk about these serious and impending matters; in which not only the students are learners, but also the teachers: in which we primarily learn to respect one another.

In a system permeated with dehumanizing practices becomes difficult to “swim against the current”. María del Carmen Salazar’s (2013) has great utterance when speaking concerning the daily challenges teachers of minority students face against deficit ideas. The following quote represent my views and some of the basis for the inquiry I’m conducting:

Educators must guard against deficit orientations that strip students of their humanity. Although many educators may explicitly advocate for respect of cultural and linguistic differences, educational systems often perpetuate cultural replacement and assimilation into mainstream values and practices through a focus on high-stakes testing, English-only programming, whitestream curriculum, uncritical pedagogy, and deficit perspectives of parents and families. (p. 131)

This is the reason why I dedicate time and effort to explore and inquire concerning the ways in which teachers can influence and lead each other toward providing a better environment for our students to learn and succeed.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In the section that follows, I offer an overview of the literature on dehumanizing practices in education, followed by practices that promote humanizing education characterized by acknowledgement and *respeto* (Valdés, 1996). I will also review the literature on how the concept of identity relates to language ideologies and cultural affirmation leads to humanizing practices. To conclude this review I will connect these concepts with the establishment of collaborative learning communities, which could represent an ideal environment for teachers to have conversations learning from each others' experiences and strengths.

The following topics are closely related to my pedagogical inquiry because, as Weisman (2001) states, the language ideologies even among Latino teachers may cause them to not validate their students' cultural identity nor provide an environment that would promote their success, thus perpetuating an unbalanced view toward subordinate cultures that is evident in society (Trueba, 1999). Therefore, the attitudes and beliefs in relation to a teacher's identity can become a critical issue.

### **Dehumanizing Pedagogies**

In her latest review on humanizing pedagogy Salazar cites Bartolomé (2013, p. 132) concerning the concept of dehumanizing pedagogy: "deficit approaches in teaching that result in discriminatory practices that strip students of the cultural, linguistic, and familial aspects that make them unique, self-possessed individuals" (p. 176). The history

of bilingual education has been characterized by a denial to preserve the students' language and culture (Ruiz 1984; Freire & Macedo, 1989) influenced by a deficit thinking mentality that started before the twentieth century with the obsolete idea of genetic inferiority (Valencia, 1997). Valencia also quotes samples of measures used to control and guard from the reproduction of "high-grade defective" races (Terman, 1916). By the 1960's, these overtly racist ideologies had lost their credibility; however they gave way to the development of cultural deficit thinking (Foley, 1997). In the mid twentieth century O. Lewis conducted studies among poor urban people in New York, Mexico, Cuba and Puerto Rico in which he concluded that people living in poverty tend to develop a "unique, self sustained life-style marked by negative values, norms and social practices" (p. 131). Although many would like to believe these racist beliefs were happening in the past century, in reality many of these ideologies are still present.

Even today, there is evidence in our schools of such deficit thinking mentality in which teachers view subordinate languages and cultures as an obstacle or a limitation for achieving success (Valencia, 2002; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Valencia describes in his book three characteristics common to modern deficit thinking: "First... deficit thinking uses genetic bases, particularly racial/ethnic differences in intelligence... Second, there are views... that draw from the culture of poverty paradigm. Third the theses of cultural and accumulated environmental deficits." (p. 160).

Political and unilateral show of interest in some areas of this nation represents solid steps to eliminate bilingual education and to designate English as the only language

for instruction (Sleeter, 1999) even for English Language Learners. In the state of California, the development and establishment of Proposition 227, also known as the Unz Ammendment, stipulating that English Language Learners would receive English only instruction without taking in consideration the learner's individual needs, the parents' desires or the recommendations of academic professionals. Followed by another example, Proposition 203 in Arizona, which intensified these requirements and provided the way to sue teachers that would not fully comply to the law (Crawford, 2004). It is not a light matter that the right to use a subordinate language is under attack (Davies Samway & Mckeon (1999). Trueba (1993) asserts that,

“Language represents one of the most powerful human resources needed to maintain a sense of self-identity and self-fulfillment. Without a full command of one's own language, ethnic identity, the sharing of fundamental cultural values... and the feelings of belonging within a group are not possible”.  
(p. 259)

Antonia Darder makes a connection between, Freire's concept of banking education (1971) and her own experience as a Spanish-speaking Puerto Rican. In her experience, and that of many others, she suffered from colonizing and hegemonic ideas throughout her education that lead to a “culture of forgetting”, in which students reject their own native language and culture to adopt the mainstream culture (in press). The result of these assimilative hegemonic practices, as Arce (2007) calls them, are representative of the description we find in Valenzuela's concept of subtractive schooling

(1999). Valenzuela makes reference to Cummins (1988) definition of “subtractive assimilation” in order to assert the notion that even bilingual programs can be subtractive if they don’t foster the usage and preservation of the students’ language and culture.

Using Freire’s terms, the ideas and practices I just presented would represent pedagogy of oppression (1971). Darder and Freire make a similar connection between education and its relationship with politics and society. They both describe education as a system of power in which the oppressor imposes their views and values on the subordinate. Similarly, Fránquiz (2012) cites the Encyclopedia of Language and Education as follows,

“Words and concepts frame and construct... any educational phenomena making some persons and groups visible, others invisible... Choice of language can minoritise or distort some individuals, groups, phenomena, and relations while majoritising and glorifying others” (Skutnabb-Kangas & McCarty, 2008)

In order to challenge these predisposed white supremacist practices, scholars that hold different points of views and advocate for a change, from dehumanizing to humanizing pedagogy (Bartolomé, 1994; Salazar & Franquiz, 2008).

### **Humanizing Practices**

The supposed lack of academic achievement among Latino students has been a focal point of interest in our nation (Nieto, 1999; Thomas, & Collier, 2002; Valdes, 2001; Cammarota, 2006). Despite the hardships, faced not only by students but also by their parents in our society, the amount of Latino students in this nation and in our educational

system continues to increase. Currently, more than 22% of the students in this nation between elementary school and high school are Latinos (Census Bureau, 2011). Although the majority of research supports the use of the native language in the education of language minority children (Rolstad, et al, 2005; Slavin & Cheung, 2005), English-only schooling is still prevailing and many mainstream educators continue to deny the efficacy of primary language instruction. More than two-thirds of the English Language learners receive their instruction only in English (Hospcock & Stephenson, 2003). As part of their endeavor to produce a humanizing pedagogy, as describe by Freire (1972), many scholars have encountered practices and concepts that show a certain amount of *respeto* (*respect*) Valdés, 1996) toward the learner and toward the culture they bring to the classroom.

Cammarota & Romero (2006) propose the union of three additive ideas: they argue that putting together “critical pedagogy (Freire, 1993), authentic caring (Valenzuela, 1999) and, social justice curriculum (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002) results in a critically compassionate intellectualism. Each of these components affords the Latino students an education that will maximize their active participation and critical thinking, providing them with opportunities to develop relationships with their teachers based on respect and mutual care with the goal of empowering the students. Ultimately, having a social justice curriculum, limits the effect of hegemonic ideas and beliefs.

Moll’s concept of “Funds of knowledge” (1992) is an example of humanizing practice that counteracts the deficit notions toward subordinate cultures since it takes into consideration a “realistic” view of the rich knowledge Latino children and their families

possess (Moll & Greenberg, 1990; Tapia, 1991). Funds of knowledge as coined by Luis Moll refer to the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being (p. 133). One key component of this theory is the idea of *seeing beyond stereotypes* (Moll et al, 1992, p.136) where teachers relate to their students' family with an opened mind, not having pre-judgment or pre-conceived expectations, but rather, being willing to learn from families (p. 137). Fránquiz & Reyes (1998) talked about ways in which teachers can be more inclusive of their students' knowledge. They asserted that when teachers allow their linguistically diverse students (and their families) to take the place of the knowledgeable other (Vygostky, 1978) on a regular basis, this could have an empowering and positive effect in the students' participation and learning.

Research has offered varied possible methods that can be employed to give students of color a voice and a participation in their education (Darder, 1995, Solorzano et. al, 2002). However, Bartolomé (1994), in citing Freire (1987), points out that "it is erroneous to assume that blind replication of instructional programs or teacher mastery of particular methods... will guarantee successful student learning" (p. 174). As she also explains, we can't assume that teachers are fine and have no need to review or revisit their beliefs and attitudes towards subordinate students.

### **Teachers' Cultural Identity and their teaching ideology**

Weisman (2001) argues that teachers' perspective and cultural identity have an impact on their language ideologies and on the value they place to *the aportes* that their



students can bring to the classroom. They also validate and value their students' families (Macedo & Bartolomé, 2000). Gay (2001) adds to this thought the idea that the progress and innovative way of allowing students this type of control can only be achieved when teachers change their attitudes and expectations when teaching minority students.

Salazar posits the need for teachers to go through a process of critical evaluation of their practices, of their beliefs that will result in gaining self-awareness, of *conscientização* (Freire, 1972, Keet et al, 2009). Teachers need to become clear of who they are and what kind of teacher they want to be for all their students (p. 8). Parting from Freire's view of dialogue, based on love and respect for the active participation of both sides, teachers can enter into a dialogue not only with their students but also with their colleagues. In this dialogue "men achieve significance as men" (p. 77), in this case teachers and students acquire this understanding of themselves and of each other, a mutual humanization (Salazar, 2008).

Bell Hooks (2003) encourages teachers to acknowledge the unbalanced perspective concerning supremacy, but at the same time to "challenge the construction of knowledge" (p.41) that occurs in our own classrooms. But to make a difference in one classroom is not enough. Krovetz and Arriaza (2006), make a connection between the teacher's need to apply critical thinking to their practice and to see themselves as researchers in a collaborative way. Darder (2000) also adds that the transformation in schools we are looking for will happen when teachers unite, take charge and cause radical changes.

### **The need for collaborative learning communities**

We have seen the need and importance of providing teachers the opportunity to learn and collaborate with each other. We have also seen that in order to achieve this goal there's also the need to provide a "safe" environment. Regarding this idea, Lindsey et al, (2007) stresses the need for teachers' learning communities, a space in which teachers learn together and from each other. In their effort to provide students with instructional strategies and improved curriculums teachers could also turn to each other for support, and coaching that will benefit not only their students but also themselves. In these collaborations teachers would share with each other strategies and approaches that have worked for them and in the same time they would work in improving each others' practices having the well being of all students in mind. If we want to change the system and the approach given in our school, there is the need for change from the inside out. There is the need of awareness and perception transforming our internal understanding not simply by external mandates (Marshall, 2005).

In the case of this inquiry, it did not take place in the setting of collaborative learning communities, but rather in the conversations among school teachers looking to assess each other's cultural knowledge and values to deepen their learning (Costa and Garmston, 2005). They were seeking to learn from each other and even to get inspiration from each other.

## METHODOLOGY

This inquiry was conducted through interviews and informal conversations carried out with three Latina teachers of English Language Learners. I was inspired to do it this way after reading Weisman's article and noticing the simple but powerful questions she asked the four teachers in her article, I decided to use her questions as a springboard and to also follow the natural flow of the conversations. The participants are my coworkers, with whom I have an active and positive working relationship. My desire was to have the interviews at informal and comfortable places, where the participants could feel relaxed to share and speak freely, in other words, to provide them with a "safe space". The first two participants felt more comfortable going to a restaurant. Perhaps this was not the most ideal setting to have these interviews, but, borrowing Valenzuela's idea of "love is one taquito away" (p. 111), I would like to declare that change could be "one meal away". The third participant invited me to her house. Each interview varied in time, according to the development of the conversation and the richness of the interview's content. I want to clarify and reiterate that instead of focusing on their personal levels of cultural awareness, as Arce (2004) posits I found that it was important to provide teachers with opportunities for dialogue in which they could inspire each other to use their voice, construct new knowledge. I noticed that just by having these conversations, we had the opportunity to reflect and plan for more collaboration. These conversations also provided opportunities for us to learn from each other and to plan for

ways to provide a better education for our students. If this was possible in such short and informal conversations, we can only imagine what teachers could accomplish if they have the opportunity to have these conversations with regularity and in a purposeful way. I will not include every single detail of the conversations, but I will bring out the most enlightening and meaningful comments that would be helpful to the outcome of this study.

There were a variety of closely related goals in conducting these interviews:

- 1) To learn more about my participants' cultural identities and language ideologies.
- 2) To assess how much and in what ways the participants' identities and ideologies influenced their teaching approach and the opportunities they provided for their students.
- 3) To explore the impact of providing teachers the opportunity to learn from each other and about their ideologies for mutual growth and humanization.

As I was having these candid and open conversations with these individuals I could see that their experiences were all diverse but closely linked to how clear and firm they were concerning their cultural identity and that their instruction and practices were directly and indirectly impacted by this process. Specifically I wanted to see if there was a possible relationship between a teachers' own experience of cultural conflict and cultural affirmation and their view and/or the approach they take toward their students' culture. According to Darder (1991) there are four different responses that bilingual and

bicultural individuals, and in this particular case, teachers can go through when facing or engaging in cultural conflict. They might alienate themselves from the primary culture, they might become separated from the mainstream culture, they may adopt the two cultural identities or they may enter into cultural negotiation. I would like to argue that these responses are closely related a teacher's belief and attitudes and their allegiance to each response makes an impact on their teaching practices.

All interviews were audio-recorded and had the same set of original questions (see Appendix A for the interview protocol). Since my intention was to keep the nature of the interviews informal and familial each interview developed in different ways depending on the answers given by the participants. It would be worth clarifying that the selection of the interviewee was purposeful in the sense that I knew them and had already established a positive friendship relationship with them. I got this idea from various readings that suggested the need for the establishment of a "safe space" where students can make connections and appreciate their own culture and heritage and that of other students. The possibilities for transformation are optimal if the participants feel safe and comfortable to open up (Rosaldo, 2003; Stevenson, 2003). This provision is necessary for teachers as well as for students. In the case of this study I picked teachers with whom I had already established a positive working relationship therefore, it was easy to create the safe space needed to have this type of personal conversations.

### **Participants and findings**

Camila, Misty and Esmeralda\*\*

Camila is the youngest member of our Prekindergarten team. She had 2 years of experience in bilingual education at the time of the interview. I selected Camila because I recalled having conversations with her concerning my learning at the university, sharing with her all the knowledge concerning how best to serve our students. I was also curious to know more about Camila's academic journey and her personal experience growing and studying in this country. One thing I noticed when I started working with Camila was that she had many great innovative ideas. You may say that she will think outside the box. Pretty soon, after working together it became obvious that she was highly qualified and she easily gained the trust and respect of her more experience teammates. Because of her use of hybrid language (mixing English and Spanish as she spoke) I assumed she was born in Texas from Mexican parents. Another thing I noticed was that she would go the extra mile to provide her students with a real bilingual education, meaning that she valued and foster in her students the development of their first language and the following words by Weisman (2001) made me think of her:

“... Teachers who have retained their primary cultural identities expressed an awareness of the importance of Spanish in the lives of their students beyond the confines of the classroom. They recognized the need to convey a value for the native language as a means of affirming the cultural identity of their students.”

p. 221

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\*\*All participants were given a pseudonym.

I became curious to find out how she had kept her culture and language despite growing up and going through school here in the U.S.

The first question I posed to Camila opened the window to see the possibility of cultural conflict within her. When asked to describe her cultural identity, Camila had a little hesitation and proceeded to answer,

I'd say Mexican (pause) American. Growing up my mom, she was really into her culture and she would not allow us to have any American customs, it was like if she was afraid...but growing up you have no option but to get the American culture.

To this Camila added that her mother would not have it any other way. Valdés (2001) shows samples of Latino children who go through similar experiences in which their parents are adamant to allow their children to forget their family values and priorities and how that strong foundation probably helped them to succeed. Later in the conversation, she added to this thought,

I feel I can understand my students even more, because we share similar backgrounds. I see that they bring their culture from home and then, they come to school and they face a different culture, a new language. I try to make this process easier for them.

When asked about the influence of her bilingual identity in her classroom, Camila answered,

I remember that when I was a child I always treasured and enjoyed seeing things that were common to my home and my culture, to be present in the classroom.

I've noticed that my siblings' experience is different from mine. I had opportunities in my classroom to still see my culture, but now I see my siblings learning a lot of things from the American culture. I don't want to lose my culture, and I don't want my students to lose their culture so I provide it for them.

It is important that the children keep their language because it's part of who they are... there is a moment in our lives [as immigrant or coming from other cultures] that you want to claim your culture. You go back to your roots. It was hard growing up because there was a struggle between the two cultures.

Seeing her yearning and concern about losing her culture, and her desire to provide her students with the same rich and culturally relevant education that she feels she received as a child, really had a humanizing (Freire, 1970) effect on me. As I stated at the beginning of this paper, schools can have a very dehumanizing effect on us. They can make you feel so busy, so isolated and so task driven that you lose touch with those around you.

I also think it is a great asset for her and, through her, now for me to have that first hand knowledge of the difficulties and hardships that immigrant students face when coming to this country. These students are growing up bilingual and bicultural and instead of being able to value all their knowledge and linguistic capital they are made to



“take sides” or value one side more than the other. Like in Camila’s case the dehumanizing views and ideologies can produce a struggle, an internal battle among their two languages and culture, which in reality should be equally important and that are undeniably part of them.

As I was interviewing her, Camila shared with me her experience of coming to this country. I had no clue that she had been born in Mexico. She arrived in this country when she was 4 years old. Like many others in the past, she crossed the river with her family. I don’t think it is a coincidence that she has a passion to teach 4-5 years old children, and as she told me *“cuando llegué a este país, me separaron de mi mamá y yo me fui con mi tía, que es maestra”* [when I came to this country, I was separated from my mom and I ended up with my aunt, a teacher]. I would have liked to find out more about what she thinks about these details, but I decided to not probe further. In any case, I felt honored that she shared that experience with me and I greatly appreciate that she has that experience in common with some of our students. This seemingly negative experience gives Camila and our team, cultural and experiential wealth (Yosso, 2005).

Since it is quite evident that Camila’s experience in this country and in education was contrary to the experience of many other immigrant children. Toward the end of our conversation I wanted to know what was her ideology toward bilingual education and its worth, and I also wanted to know what in her opinion were the possible reasons for the lack of success for the Latino children in our schools.

I think it is because of the language. Because they have to know Spanish and then they have to add English. I know there are different aspects, when I was in Jr. High and High School I noticed the recent immigrants were different, they had a strong culture and then there was the other extreme the Americans didn't offer anything. They were just negative toward Latinos... sometimes I felt like I wasn't good. Before, not anymore, you kind of felt ashamed of yourself.... If students keep receiving negative vibes, you would not succeed.

When she answered this way it made me think of Arizona and the film *Precious Knowledge* (2011), a documentary about the controversy over Ethnic studies curriculum in Arizona schools, presents the struggle faced both by teachers of cultural heritage studies and minority students in the midst of a white supremacist educational system. Legislation was being passed to cancel the very courses that were providing students with a space for dialogue in the way proposed by Freire.... The result of these practices was that the students were being empowered and were being led to be successful in school, but they ended up facing much opposition.

The final question I asked Camila confirmed the need for teachers to have this type of dialogue among colleagues. When asked how she fosters her students into solidifying their cultural identity

Like whenever you told me that it was really important to bring culturally relevant stuff so they feel connected.... I realized that it made sense to provide with the opportunity to relate, to make it meaningful for them. I really thought about it. I

felt, I really need to do this; I looked into it as something important. I'm being more careful or I put more emphasis not just the Mexican..."

I had forgotten I had that conversation with my team. But evidently saying just that much, made a significant change on another person. Just like I was empowered in my studies, the chain reaction continues. Our professors empowered us, and we empowered others, that's a real display of leadership. This makes me see the twofold value of having this dialogue with our fellow teachers. As Weisman (2001) asserts in her conclusion, there's "the need to incorporate issues concerning bicultural development and the mechanisms of cultural domination into professional development." (p. 222).

#### "Misty"

Misty is a highly experienced Latina teacher. We had worked together for three years with an established relationship of respect and trust. These interactions have provided us with opportunities to share ideas with each other that have lead to each other's professional growth. From those conversations I became interested in Misty's experience concerning her cultural identity. Misty doesn't speak Spanish and she teaches ESL, nevertheless, the more I shared about what I was learning and seeing in my studies, the more she wanted to hear and the more I started to see her change in herself and in the practices she implemented in her classroom when working with students who have her similar background and experience.

Surprisingly my second interviewee has some similarities with Weisman's first teacher example. They both share a dual culture identity. When I asked Misty concerning her cultural identity, she replied:

I usually say that I'm white Hispanic, because my dad is Mexican, and my mom is White, German.

She went on to elaborate:

I never grew up close to Hispanics. We didn't live on base, so the neighborhood where I grew up it was an upper middle class. I only knew two African Americans in the neighborhood. We knew about the military culture and I feel I bring that to my students that move a lot or that don't have that much structure in their life.

Through this conversation I discovered that Misty has a military family background, a fact that helps me understand the way she teaches to her students. She is extremely organized and she provides her students with a solid routine and expectations that brings stability to their learning.

However when I asked Misty about her connections with her family, I learned that due to her dad's job in the military she didn't grow up close to her extended family.

I remember interacting with my paternal grandparents, like I interact with you, when you speak Spanish to me. I might understand, but I can't speak it.

When I asked Misty about what she brings and provides to her students, she answered:

I provide my students with opportunities to learn English, but I'm especially close to my students that move a lot, because I know how hard it is to be always moving. I make sure they feel extra special, because it is hard.

This is a good example of bringing who we are and what we are to the classroom and accepting it as a resource.

When I asked Misty about the help she received from her students' parents she limited her answer to:

Well, most of them are not really available and some of them don't know how to help their child. For that I have to provide them, with their lack.

Because of this answer I can tell that I could share with Misty ways to involve her parents through school-home communication and collaboration. It was encouraging that through the conversation, Misty mentioned more than once that she had continued reflecting on some of the conversations we have had on education practices and that she was implementing some of the suggestions I had given her.

There were two very meaningful interactions during our conversation. First, when I asked Misty if she felt Hispanic and if she missed any of her cultural heritage, she answered:

If I wish I had the ability to speak Spanish? I do... that is part of my heritage.

We still have our traditions, but I do miss not having the Spanish.

I find it quite interesting that she values the benefit of speaking Spanish... Second, she also commented that she wants her son to participate in our Dual Language Two way program.

I want him to have, what I don't have.

It is important to also mention that Misty wanted to be the ESL teacher for the Dual Language Two way program. When I initially met Misty, she wasn't so open to interacting in Spanish, but through the creation of a safe space, she became more open to dialogue and to participating in the humanizing process to the extent she feels comfortable. These positive examples are the result of teachers' collaboration and sharing of their findings and beliefs which can have a positive influence on other teachers, therefore also on other students' education.

Salazar (2012) refers to her finding with Fránquiz in a similar way concerning the transformation of a teacher and her pedagogical attitudes for the benefit of her immigrant students. Salazar mentions mentioned (which one) the funds of knowledge of respeto [respect], confianza [confidence], etc. If this is of benefit for students it is also for the teachers as learners. Along these lines Misty added,

To me it is normal that Latino children speak English. I have a lot in common with my students that are English Speaking children. Since I moved here people expect me to speak Spanish. I try to get close to my students parents.

When asked about how she involves more of her parents in the classroom she answered,

I started sending the folders you tell me about, where I made sure to let the parents know what we are doing in the classroom and I give them an opportunity to be more involved in their child's education.

Here again I see evidence of the impact and rippling effect sharing ideas and thoughts can have on your colleagues. Without a clear realization and just as a result of the learning and humanization I was having in my Masters' Program I was influencing others positively and helping them not only question their practices but also finding ways to improve the opportunities provided to minority students and their families. Talking to Misty also provided me with a unique insight into her personal experiences and how I could also take advantage of her strengths and resources.

“Esmeralda”

How could I not interview Esmeralda? Another young, but experienced bilingual teacher who recently finished her graduate studies in Curriculum and Instruction selected as participant to a Master Program focused on bilingual, biliterate and bicultural education., the same program that inspired me to conduct this inquiry. When I met Esmeralda, it became evident to me that she not only received a good foundation and knowledge of students' culture and identities, but she possesses a rich bicultural and bilingual identity and has plenty of experience in this area.

Esmeralda was born in the United States to Mexican parents. She mentioned that her mom is a teacher and right away from the conversation and from observing her

classroom you can tell she is passionate about providing her students with as many opportunities as possible for them to take control of their learning.

When asked about her cultural identity, Esmeralda answered:

I'm Mexican- American, but I like to call myself Latina.... I remember going to visit Mexico and having the feeling that they thought I wasn't one of them. They would even suggest that I was the Güera...

It became evident to me that Esmeralda had some definite struggles and negotiations with her bicultural and biliterate identity. She, also shared that she didn't used to speak Spanish proficiently, that she desired to speak with her grandma and that she would feel frustrated to not be able to have meaningful interactions with her. This shows her desire to connect with her culture and her family background. You can tell family is important for her and she brings that to her classroom:

*"I include my students "funds of knowledge" I realize that it is more than simply cultural relevant pedagogy, but to bring their lives and their families wisdom to the classroom".*

In Esmeralda's classroom, her students feel comfortable and welcome to bring who they are, their culture and their language.

*"My students talk about the remedios [remedies] their parents prepare for them... they get so excited to share about what they know and what their families know".*



Esmeralda also provides her students with opportunities to have meaningful rigorous learning allowing them to take control of their learning. Their learning takes place in a safe environment of respect and acceptance.

*“I allow my students to use whatever language they want, I don’t care if the language of the day is a different one. I want them to talk and I want them to participate.”*

Esmeralda likes to think of her classroom as a “safety nest” for her students. She regrets that they are separated by language in the classroom, but she strives to provide them with opportunities to *“expand their experiences and to learn about other cultures.”* When visiting her classroom, it is evident to me that she shares with her students a relationship base on respect and acceptance.

When asked about where she learned about the type of practices you uses in her classroom and if it was a result of her conducting her master studies she responded *“I think I started to do this in a natural way, because in [her elementary school] even in the 80’s and 90’s we were taught about the Aztecas. There was an art teacher that taught us how to make traditional masks...to appreciate the local artists...”* Even in her response I see confirmation of the importance to identify and create awareness of teachers that are “thinking outside the box”, that are providing their students with a rigorous, and liberating education. There is no limit to the extend teachers can cause change in their classrooms, in children’s lives and in their colleagues practices, views and ideologies.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

Franquiz (2012) speaks of the quest in which teachers applying humanizing pedagogy engage themselves and how Freire (1970) refers to it as a mutual humanization. In my personal experience it is quite rare that I would have the opportunity to engage in the type of dialogue presented in this inquiry with my colleagues. In order to provide teachers with these experiences and opportunities for growth we need consider what it takes to accomplish this. In this case I presented some examples of the humanizing that can take place when this process involves teachers working together to bring this realization to one another.

Though, providing the safe place, time and resources to carry out the dialogues mentioned by Freire would produce optimal results at a school district level, it is realistic to begin with individual schools. A school administration that is aware of the need and benefit of having this type of collaboration would be more willing to provide their teachers the time and setting for it to happen.

There is also the need to establish school leadership with the boldness to question and analyze the traditional way, paradigms and ideologies. The very essence of this process involves a certain level of liberation that provides both teachers and students the opportunity to challenge their own ideas and that of others; to question their pedagogical practices and habits and to dig deeper the meaning and views that prevail in our

educational system in order to break with the traditional results. In order to have empowered students, we must empower the teachers.

To accomplish this, Salazar (2008) suggests the need to “engage in praxis (Freire, 1970), or critical reflection and action, in order to nurture critical consciousness for teachers, students”. Teachers dedicate a considerable amount of time to planning for instruction, but it is not so common for teachers to get together to reflect and discuss the outcome of their lessons and ways to improve them. By teachers engaging regularly in this type of dialogue, we could see how they would inspire each other to consider better ways , to influence each other positively in order to better serve their students.

## **CONCLUSION**

The goal of this inquiry was to experiment on the idea of teachers engaging in what Salazar (2008) quotes from Freire (1970) as a praxis or critical reflection and action, in order to nurture critical consciousness for teachers, students”.

In order to support this idea and demonstrate its value and worth I engaged myself in both a literature review of scholars who have paid attention to the ways in which other educators put humanizing pedagogy into practice and even on how educators may enter into a dialogue that not only bring up their students’ humanity, but that humanize them also.

I also engaged in a quest for learning from my peers including taking the time to get to know them in a more human and meaningful way. This process involved getting to know their backgrounds in order to identify their cultural and language ideologies, along with their strengths and humanizing practices. For this to be successful, I placed myself in the position of a learner, making sure I showed respect to my colleagues and reassure them that I was not judging their practices rather that I wanted to learn from them.

The result of this inquiry has shown to have no limits. We continue to have conversations, to endeavor to learn from one another and to develop humanizing practices for ourselves and for our students. It has become evident and imperative that we use humanizing pedagogy in our classrooms, but that is not enough. We need to enlarge our group and we need to gain more teachers that would be willing to dedicate time and

space to have this conversations. Not only our students need to be empowered to have a voice and presence in their education, but also their teachers need to be empowered to pursue a humanizing process that will lead them to become better teachers, better humans.

## Appendix

List of questions that guided the interviews.

1. What is your cultural identity? How do you describe yourself culturally?\*
2. Which language do you feel you use the most?\*
3. Do you think that your dual cultural identity, that you are bilingual is useful in your classroom?\*
4. How do you feel you help your students?
5. Who taught you to use those practices (best practices, humanizing pedagogy?
6. Do you think that coming from a Mexican family brought you cultural conflict?\*
7. With your classmates or your teachers?
8. When you were in elementary school, did you use your Spanish? How?\*
9. How does your cultural background influences your classroom?\*
10. Where is it that you don't see the cultural background?
11. Why do you think English is stronger in you?
12. What value do you give to your language, to your culture in your classroom?\*
13. Where you born in México? When did you arrive in this country?
14. Do you have any artifact that represents you?\*
15. How did your family migrated to the United States? If you feel comfortable to tell me...

16. You grew up in this country as a Latina, why do you think people say Latinos have limitations at school?\*
17. You know that states such as California and Arizona eliminated bilingual education, what do you think of that?
18. How do you help your students develop their cultural identity that we've been talking about?\*
19. Why is it hard?
20. As a teacher, do you think you can make a difference on education?

The questions with the asterisk are the same as the questions found in Weisman's article. The other questions originated from the conversations.

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